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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews current literature on self-esteem, addressing its defining characteristics, discussing its importance, citing significant research findings on the development and benefits of self-esteem, and providing suggestions for counselors who seek to enhance their clients' self-esteem. Five references are included. (TE)

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Counseling to Enhance Self-Esteem

Garry R. Walz

Introduction

Reading the newspapers, reviewing professional association conference programs or even watching TV sitcoms will quickly convey the impression that a person's self-esteem is a major determinant of what a person accomplishes and how fulfilled and rewarding a life he or she lives. As one teenager said, "You ain't nothin if you ain't got high self-esteem." This belief in the potency of self-esteem to effect how rewarding our life is, and how productive we are, has clearly been bought into by the public at large, and is a major target of new product development by commercial vendors. An educational publisher's recent catalogue offered twice the number of resources on self-esteem over any other topic. A recent ERIC database search identified over 5,000 journal articles where self-esteem was a major focus of the article.

A person motivated to reach a clear understanding of what self-esteem is and how it can be increased may be puzzled by various definitions and prescriptions for raising it. This digest, therefore, is written with the intention of helping counselors to be a force for positive change in the self-esteem of their clients.

What is Self-Esteem?

Definitions of self-esteem vary considerably in both their breadth and psychological sophistication. From an intuitive sense we know that high self-esteem means that we appreciate ourselves and our inherent worth. More specifically, it means we have a positive attitude, we evaluate ourselves highly, we are convinced of our own abilities and we see ourselves as competent and powerful—in control of our own lives and able to do what we want. In addition, we compare ourselves favorably with others. We also know what it means to experience diminished self-esteem—self-depreciation, helplessness, powerlessness and depression (Mecca, Smelser & Vasconcellos, 1989).

It also may help us in better understanding self-esteem to differentiate self-concept from self-esteem. Self-concept is the totality of a complex, organized and dynamic system of learned beliefs, attitudes and opinions that each person holds to be true about his or her personal existence (Purkey, 1988). Self-esteem is focused upon feelings of personal worth and the level of satisfaction regarding one's self. Another approach to defining self-esteem is to identify the almost universally accepted components of self-esteem. They are: (1) a cognitive element, or the characterizing of self in descriptive terms, e.g., power, confidence; (2) an affective element or a degree of positiveness or negativeness, e.g., high or low self-esteem; and (3) an evaluative element related to some ideal standard, e.g., what a high school graduate should be able to do (Mecca, Smelser & Vasconcellos, 1989).

Nathaniel Branden provides a particularly compelling view of self-esteem (Branden, 1990). He sees it as having two interrelated aspects: a sense of personal efficacy (self-efficacy) or confidence in a person's ability to think and act; and a sense of personal worth (self-respect) or an affirmative attitude towards a person's right to live and to be happy. In the most succinct terms, self-esteem is the disposition to experience oneself as competent to cope with the challenges of life and to be deserving of happiness.

Why is Self-Esteem Important?

The importance of self-esteem can be considered from several perspectives. First, it is important to normal, psychological development. To adequately cope with the challenges of growing and developing, persons need to believe that they have the capacity to achieve what they need and want to and that they are deserving of happiness and joy in life. Lacking a belief in either of the above, they may be productive in an external sense, but are probably less effective and creative than they would be if they possessed high self-esteem. The effects of self-esteem may also be seen in career planning and decision making. For a person to make a nontraditional career choice, e.g., a female entering engineering, or to go against family desires or pressures requires someone to have a belief in their ability to make appropriate plans and decisions even though important others in their lifespace disagree with them. Registering for advanced placement classes or applying to a highly competitive college may also challenge the self-esteem of an individual. Most people can attest to having experienced times when they were on top, when they were at their "peak performance." These "peaks" in our performance curve illustrate that when people believe in themselves (have high self-efficacy) and believe they can accomplish almost anything, they are expressing a self-esteem which motivates, excites and empowers them. It is this expression of strong self-esteem at a critical juncture in their lives which can help a person to become more of what they are capable of becoming.

It has also been suggested that high self-esteem imparts to a person an immunity to the downturns in the roller coaster of life. Rejections, disappointments and failure are a part of daily life. Life is not always fair or equitable and even our best efforts are not always successful. But high esteem can assist a person in "weathering the storm," to look beyond immediate downward dips.

The current management literature is filled with descriptions of the type of people who will function well in our "information" society. Descriptions of these people are replete with statements regarding the need in an information age for workers who can make independent decisions, take risks, vigorously pursue new ideas and untried approaches, and act on their own initiative. These traits are characteristic of persons with high self-esteem, of those who are confident of their abilities and gain pleasure from acting on them. These traits also assume an economic importance because they lead to more effective and productive employees. Organizations with productive employees are successful in the competitive marketplace and earn greater profits.

Significant Findings

An analysis of the research and scholarly literature suggests a number of significant findings and generalizations about the importance and the effects of self-esteem upon youth and adults. Overall it would appear that self-esteem can be envisaged as a "social vaccine," a dimension of personality that empowers people and innoculates them against a wide spectrum of self-defeating and socially undesirable behavior (California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem, 1990). Among the more compelling generalizations to be made are the following :

1. The family is a strong force in the development of self-esteem. The early years are particularly important in establishing an "authentic and abiding self-esteem" in a person.
2. High parental self-esteem is crucial to the ability to nurture high self-esteem and personal effectiveness in children.
3. School climate plays an important role in the development of the self-esteem of students. Schools that target self-esteem as a major school goal appear to be "more successful academically as well as in developing healthy self-esteem among their students" (California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem, 1990, p. 5).
4. Self-esteem and achievement may be either the cause or the effect of each other, depending upon the person and the particular situation in which they function.
5. Young girls who possess positive self-esteem are less likely to become pregnant as teenagers.
6. Persons who hold themselves in high esteem are less likely to engage in destructive and self-destructive behavior including child abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, violence and crime.
7. Exclusive attention to just self-esteem or personal achievement may well result in less favorable outcomes in either or both areas than when an approach is used which attends to both self-esteem and achievement. Walz and Bleuer (in press) in postulating the presence of an "esteem-achievement connection" emphasize the importance of presenting students with challenging experiences that enable the student to "earn" high esteem by successfully coping with difficult tasks.
8. The choice to esteem oneself or not is ultimately the responsibility of the individual no matter what the background and prior experiences of the individual may be. High self-esteem can never be given to a person by another person or society. It must be sought, "earned" by the individual for him or herself.
9. Self-esteem may be expressed as an overall generic characteristic, i.e., "she exhibits a high self-esteem" or as a more specific behaviorial attribute, i.e., "he certainly has a high sense of self-esteem in tackling a difficult writing task, but he has absolutely no belief in his competence to do anything numerical." The experience of many counselors would favor a counseling intervention that explores a client's overall self-esteem (enhancing his/her generic self-esteem), but also focuses upon blockages which retard the expression of high self-esteem in specific areas.
10. Writers and researchers show general although by no means complete agreement on the preconditions necessary for someone to demonstrate high self-esteem. Among the commonly used terms are: security, connectedness, uniqueness, assertiveness, competence, and spirituality.

Action Steps for Counselors

Gaining greater knowledge and understanding of self-esteem can be beneficial to a counselor. However, to specifically impact upon a client's self-esteem requires greater focus and effort upon the part of the counselor. Six action steps are suggested as guides for how a counselor can intervene to assist clients in enhancing their own self-esteem.

- Acknowledge that the self-esteem of a client is a vital determinant in his/her behavior and should be a major focus of the counseling relationship.
- Explore with the client the meaning of self-esteem and how his/her self-esteem has impacted upon past behaviors and actions (and can influence present and future plans and decisions).
- Assist the client in assessing the internal and external forces contributing to or retarding their self-esteem. Develop a personally meaningful profile of esteem builders and detractors.
- Recognize that the self-esteem of the counselor has a stimulating or depressing effect upon the esteem of a client and that each needs to be aware of his/her self-esteem and its effect upon others.
- Assist the client in designing a self-esteem enhancement program that is customized to her/his learning style and desired goals.
- Above all else, act upon the conviction that self-esteem is a disposition to know oneself as someone who is competent to cope with the realities and demands of life and as personally worthy of experiencing joy and happiness. Acting upon this conviction a counselor will then know that she/he can neither bestow nor induce self-esteem in another person. Through their efforts, however, counselors can assist a person to learn the processes by which they can examine the antecedents of their self-esteem, and take responsibility for thinking and acting in ways which will heighten their own self-esteem and hence their capacity to experience life confidently and joyously.

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